DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 496 SO 016 237

AUTHOR Olsson, Micael
TITLE Meeting Styles for Intercultural Groups. Occasional Papers in Intercultural Learning No. 7.
INSTITUTION AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Feb 85
NOTE 24p.
AVAILABLE FROM AFS International, 313 East 43rd St., New York, NY 10017 (free).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conferences; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Interrelationships; Decision Making; *Group Dynamics; *Intercultural Communication; Intergroup Relations; *Meetings

ABSTRACT

Intended to help those interested in developing ways of coping effectively with the wide variety of meeting and decision-making styles that are available throughout the world, the booklet integrates a number of ideas and approaches discussed at a recent convention of the Society of Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR). An introductory section discusses implications of the correlation between language, thought, and behavior as related to meeting styles for intercultural groups. The next section, "Learning Together through Intercultural Dialogue," warns that in many cases the very structure and conventions adopted during meetings can significantly reduce the level of participation of the less dominant group and that such structure can be changed and can eventually lead to a change of attitudes as well. A section on traditional meeting styles presents examples of meeting styles of the Maaga of Nepal, the Barai of Papau New Guinea, the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria, the Mapuche of Chile, and the peasants of Malay. The examples highlight cultural diversity in leadership roles, the presence or absence of periods of silence, levels of participation, and the presence or absence of food or drink. Nine flexible aspects of the structure of meetings are briefly discussed: participant roles, sequence of participation, topic control, decision-making process, pace, space orientation, punctuality, language choice, and amenities. In the final section, examples of artificially reconstructed meeting styles are given to demonstrate the possibility of developing new styles to better facilitate meetings between intercultural groups. (LH)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cornelius Lee Grove

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE OF AFS INTERNATIONAL

AFS volunteers and professional staff throughout the world are moving towards the goal of peace by stimulating an awareness of mankind's common humanity, a wider understanding of the diverse cultures of the world, and a concern for the global issues confronting society. They acknowledge that peace is a dynamic concept threatened by injustices both between and within nations.

In pursuit of this goal, the core of the AFS experience has been the promotion of relationships in which families, communities, groups and maturing young persons from different cultural backgrounds share new learning situations related to the purposes of AFS. In addition, through experience and experimentation, AFS has developed and continues to encourage new models and opportunities for exchange that will be beneficial for the development of society.

AFS does not affiliate with any religious, political or partisan group, but it believes in the value of participating in a continuous process of interaction between cultures both across and within boundaries.

AFS encourages all participants to involve themselves in situations in which they can apply and project their AFS experience.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

## INTRODUCTION

One might expect intercultural specialists to have developed routine ways of coping effectively with the wide variety of meeting and decision-making styles that are available throughout the world. But the ferment within SIETAR International* during the past two years regarding this very issue demonstrates that we specialists are groping for solutions, too. Micael Olsson was party to the discussions that took place last Spring at the SIETAR Convention in Virginia. His article, which we feature in this issue, integrates a number of ideas and approaches that were discussed there, plus others drawn from his own knowledge and experience. **Meeting Styles for Intercultural Groups** will be useful as well as informative for all who must meet together and make decisions with culturally different people.

Micael Olsson earned his Ph.D. in theoretical linguistics from the Australian National University; currently, he is a lecturer in the Department of Language at the University of Papua New Guinea. His research focuses on the development of nonformal education programs for the remote village populations of the nation. Since he arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1968, Dr. Olsson's work has centered around the language and literature of the Barai, a group of 2000 speakers who make up just one of the numerous language groups on the island.

### IMPORTANT NOTICE TO ALL READERS

The **Occasional Papers in Intercultural Learning** are free to all who request them. Having no subscription system, we lack the usual means for determining who has moved and who should no longer receive issues for any reason. We must, therefore, completely reconstitute our address list from time to time.

If you receive this copy by mail, you should find herein a special form to be completed and returned. **You will no longer receive this publication in the mail unless you complete and return this form.** Should the form be absent, you may insure receipt of future issues by sending us, typed or printed, your complete name and address along with a note saying that you wish to remain on the mailing list. Send this note to the Research Department, AFS International, 313 East 43rd Street, New York, New York 10017, USA.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

* SIETAR is the acronym for the **Society for Intercultural Education, Training, And Research.** For information about SIETAR International, write to SIETAR, 1414 Twenty-second St. NW, Washington, DC 20037, USA.

# MEETING STYLES FOR INTERCULTURAL GROUPS

Micael Olsson
Department of Language
University of Papua New Guinea

*Melanesia has been invaded by a huge tidal wave from the West in the form of colonialisation and Christianisation. Like any tidal wave, the West came mercilessly with force and power, toppling over our earth, destroying our treasures, depositing some rich soils, but also leaving behind much rubbish.*

*This Western tidal wave has also set in motion chain reactions within ourselves and a thirst for a better future. Western influence has a negative and destructive aspect. Melanesian Voice also sees it as a wave whose moving ripples should be used as a living light for a new future.*

*Whilst acknowledging our beautiful past along with its constraints, we also recognize the good in the new ways, and are mindful too of the bad ways of today. With the freedom we have, we can make conscious decisions to opt for what is best in both worlds.*

*Today, we Melanesians stand on a crossroads. More than any people in the world, we can choose. We can choose to ape the West and the East, or we can choose to be ourselves in our philosophy, our lifestyle, and our whole beings.*

Bernard Narokobi[1]

While it is true that it is possible for Melanesians of the Pacific to control and shape their future, it is also true that much existing institutional life within Melanesia today has been heavily Westernized and, as such, gives little opportunity for truly Melanesian choices.

By way of example, consider a group called the Barai who live on an island plateau in the Oro Province of Papua New Guinea. There are now six Western-style institutions in their area that heavily influence current choices for the 2000 people involved. They are a community grade school, a local health center, the Anglican Church, a nonformal education association, a local coffee cooperative, and the

local government council. Each of these bodies has boards or committees that supposedly have an important role in planning and decision-making. But each group includes one or more "outsiders" who are linked to parent institutions outside the community and who, consciously or unconsciously, tend to use the Western institutional structure to dominate planning and decision-making. Just so, a heavily Western-style meeting is hardly likely to result in Melanesian choices. If Melanesian choice is to become a reality, the meeting style used within these influential institutions will need to be adjusted.

While the focus here is on rural Melanesia, the principles involved have broad implications for intercultural groups of various kinds, from a Northern Territory Health Board in Australia to committee work within the United Nations and even the working sessions of an international professional association of intercultural specialists.[2] Is it possible to devise some kind of meeting style that is more suitable for bridging what we might call traditional and Western thought? Is there some kind of synthesis of different approaches that does not leave all the adjusting to just one side?

In linguistics, we often refer to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis[3] when talking about the close relationship between language, thought patterns, and accepted ways of behaving. Each language coins words for things that are important to that particular group of speakers. For example, the Barai of Papua New Guinea have 30 different words for "yam" and yet only one for all of the following: bed, chair, table, bench, desk, counter, and cupboard. In a yam cult society, fine distinctions among types of yams are to be expected as is one term for any furniture with a flat surface in their mild tropical climate where most of their time is spent out-of-doors. Furniture is simply unimportant. The heart of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that the language we hear continually from birth into adulthood deeply influences the ways we think and perceive, and that the ways we think and perceive deeply influence the ways we act. The Barai have complex ways of acting with respect to yams, but almost none with respect to flat-surfaced furniture.

What are the implications of this correlation between language, thought, and behavior when it comes to meeting styles for intercultural groups? Language differences are only part of the problem. Different thought patterns and hence different expectations about how things should be done underscore the importance of sensitive dialogue between those who come to meetings with different cultural perspectives.

## LEARNING TOGETHER THROUGH INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

The relativity of thought patterns and expectations to cultural determination may seem elementary, but too often we lose sight of this

basic principle and begin to function as though our particular cultural perspective were a superior one. For many of us, there simply is no way to step out of our cultural grid to have an objective look at it or to examine it in relation to alternative grids. Our own grid just seems like part of the packaging that life comes in and we tend to accept it as such. Carlos Castenada,[4] in his book Journey to Ixtlan, insightfully illustrates how for each of us the world of our everyday life is not so much reality itself as one of several possible interpretations of it. Our perceptions are the product of our cultural teachers, that is, all the people we have associated with from earliest childhood. We share "membership" with that group of associates. We have little opportunity to compare the views acquired from those associates with any of the possible alternatives. For there is no point of reference to reveal that our perceptions are only interpretations that we have learned to make in common with those of our subgroup. The constantly recurring tide of reinforcement leads us to take our view of reality for granted. After all, what grounds do we have for questioning it? Castenada suggests that it takes a jarring personal experience totally at odds with our normal expectations to trigger any serious appreciation of a fundamentally different view of reality. Such an experience he calls "stopping the world".

But if such an experience is so rare, how can we expect people of different cultures to function together in committees and meetings in any productive way? Clearly, both the identification of needs and any possible solutions will need to be explored together through some kind of INTER-cultural exchange of views. In the sphere of rural development in the Third World, for example, neither Western nor traditional knowledge can be expected, on its own, to provide any "right" answers. Each cultural tradition, with its unique history of accumulated knowledge and experience, has something to contribute to defining development and how to go about it. And so, in today's world, as the various culture groups become more and more interdependent, it becomes increasingly important to find and use meeting styles that are effective in integrating independently acquired knowledge.

The importance of this kind of dialogue to growth and development of human beings has long been stressed by philosophers such as the Hasidic, Martin Buber. In his book, The Way of Response, he reminds us of the limitations of our particular point of view and, at the same time, of the possibility of learning from one another:

> *Human life and humanity come into being in genuine meeting. There man learns not merely that he is limited by man, cast upon his own finitude, partialness, need of completion, but his own relation to truth is heightened by the other's different relation to the same truth -- different in accordance with his individuation and destined to take seed and grow differently.*[5]

So to Buber, life and all its possibilities flowers when two people, each bound by their limited experience, genuinely "meet". Their

relation becomes marked by a spirit of openness and an awareness of their need to be stretched and expanded. But the learning that ensues, rather than yielding two copies of one pattern, allows each to develop his own unique potential: to grow, but to grow uniquely; to discover, but to discover because of meeting someone quite different from oneself. Is not the same principle applicable to whole culture groups as well, each being limited and each potentially heightened by the other's insight?

And yet all too often, here in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere too, when Western culture meets traditional life, communication tends to be one way. Unfortunately, most of the group learning experiences that take place in the villages are organized according to patterns typical of Western institutions. Whether by fault or by design, the flow of information as well as the control of planning and decision-making tend to come from the top down through the schools and churches, through the health centers, and through the extension divisions of government departments. Margaret Ogomeni, a workshop leader with the South Pacific Appropriate Technology Foundation, points out the inhibiting effect the top-down approach has on learning in rural villages.

> *The line of communication between teacher and student is one way. The teacher is the expert and the student is the empty cup to be filled with "knowledge." The lecture format ensures this one-way flow of information. At school the students are grouped by grade and class where the teacher decides what everyone should learn and everyone learns the same thing. Students learn by memorizing and accepting the teacher's solution to the problems. Unfortunately, in Papua New Guinea this is the only pattern with which we are familiar.*
>
> *[Therefore,] an approach which involves traditional forms of learning must be used. This would include free communication between teachers and learners, building people's confidence in what they already know, dealing with people as equals, and accepting limitations. In most cases, village people are so used to "top down" approaches that it is not easy for them to share their ideas and experiences.*[6]

Part of the problem stems from lingering attitudes of paternalism, attitudes that are hard to change. But, in many cases, the very structure and conventions adopted during meetings can significantly reduce the level of participation of the less dominant group. Such structure can be changed and can eventually lead to a change of attitude as well. So if the structure of a meeting style being used in an intercultural setting is hindering the effectiveness of that body, some attention should be given to constructing an alternative.

In order to do this, it might be helpful to examine something of the range of possible structures. One might think, considering the spread of Robert's Rules of Order and conventions like voting and chairpersons, that these are elements of some kind of universally preferred process. But, in fact, they are simply artifacts of Western tradition and hence one of many possibilities. Different ethnic groups show incredible variety in terms of the elements of their meeting styles.

## TRADITIONAL MEETING STYLES

Let us begin with the Maaga of Nepal. The sequence of participation in their local meetings is such that men of lesser influence and authority state their views in the early stages of the discussion. The order of participation then gradually shifts upwards through the line of authority until finally the person with the greatest authority speaks last, integrating the various points of view and stating the consensus of the group. Voting isn't necessary. It is possible, however, during the progression of discussion from lower to higher ranking participants, for a man of higher authority to prevent someone of lower rank from speaking by deliberately speaking before him, an option he would be careful not to take too often.

Gaps of silence may be points of discomfort associated with personality clashes or lack of interest in Western circles. But for the Barai of Papua New Guinea, periods of silence in the middle of discussion are anticipated and valued. Waiting and silence are an important part of the meeting process during which the implications of what is being said are weighed and the sense of the group is determined. Even halting deliveries and pauses are happily accepted; various speakers finish someone's sentence or add some detail, a kind of cooperative effort to collectively express a point of view.

The Ibo of Eastern Nigeria[7] allow every adult male to attend the village meeting and to voice his opinion. But, after the initial discussion, the elders meet alone to reach a decision which then has to come back to the larger body for approval. There is recognized structure within the council of elders as well. Certain natural leaders function there who depend on their skill as arbitrators and their capacity to perform services in order to maintain their influence.

Among the Mapuche of Chile, authority is shared and varies with the degree of participation in the whole decision-making process. Four levels of influence are recognized. In the village of Ccipuco, for example, the 26 family heads can be grouped according to their level of participation in group meetings as follows:

a. the central group (7 members)
   - always or nearly always attends meetings
   - actively influences discussion and gives individual opinions

b. the regular group (8 members)
   - comes frequently to meetings
   - supports group decisions
   - rarely presents personal opinions

c. the marginal group (5 members)
   - attends meetings irregularly
   - shows minimal interest in affairs under discussion
   - speaks only on matters which personally affect it

d. the nonparticipating group (6 members)
   - rarely attends meetings
   - shows little interest in community affairs
   - frequently does not observe decisions reached

So even though no chairman is recognized, everyone present is aware of the covert structure that gauges the weight of each contribution.

In Malay peasant society, the sharing of food is an important variable in the structure of group meetings. Take, for example, meetings organized to resolve conflict. The penghulu, a local leader . . .

> *invites the conflicting parties to meet together in his house. He serves them light drinks and sweets, and over these they discuss their problems. . . . Actually, the tidbits served are to encourage and, if possible, to symbolize that all parties have agreed to "forgive and forget", in the manner that feasts are sometimes held by political leaders to bring together and resolve differences among conflicting factions.*[8]

We see therefore that differences in leadership roles, the presence or absence of periods of silence, levels of participation, or even the presence or absence of food and drink are all significant variables in contrasting meeting styles.

It may be, however, that all this cultural diversity can be reduced to two fundamental patterns. Claire Halverson[9] suggests that this is indeed the case. She distinguishes between patterns she labels as field sensitive/high context on the one hand, and field independent/low context on the other. She believes that there is some sort of basic relationship linking the former with women and the Eastern tradition, and linking the latter with men and the Western tradition.

| WOMEN<br>EASTERN | MEN<br>WESTERN |
|---|---|
| Field Sensitive<br>High Context | Field Independent<br>Low Context |
| holistic, global cognitive style | fragmented, linear cognitive style |
| group oriented | task oriented |
| personalization | abstraction |
| ambiguity | certainty |
| slow | fast |

A recent critique of the meeting style used in the International Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research shows that, despite its focus on the intercultural scene, the session was dominated by the field independent/low context model. It is a familiar pattern that needs to be given careful attention if full participation of people from different backgrounds is going to be achieved. In such situations, the discussion tends to be dominated by a few "masculine" personalities, making it difficult for others to get an opportunity to speak. The topic shifts easily from one fragmented bit of reality to another, with little apparent need for fitting the bits together into some kind of meaningful whole. The function of the group becomes task-oriented even though this may mean the sacrificing of interpersonal harmony within the group.

These examples illustrate something of the wide variety of structure that is associated with meeting styles in different cultural settings. Introducing a Western meeting style into any of these non-Western contexts would be as dangerous as the introduction of a top-down communication style proved to be in the rural villages of Papua New Guinea. What is quite appropriate in one setting may inhibit or embarrass in another. Nor is it any more acceptable to require the outsider to fully adopt the local meeting style. Some kind of synthesis that spreads the adjustment around equitably is more likely to succeed. But how can such a synthesis be constructed? Perhaps the place to begin is to examine in more detail the various aspects of the meeting process, each of which is amenable to conscious adjustment in one way or another.

## FLEXIBLE ASPECTS OF MEETINGS

There are nine aspects of the structure of meetings that we will consider here. Each deals with some part of the organization of a meeting that can be changed simply by deciding to do so. Since these aspects of meetings are flexible -- that is, since each varies along a continuum of specific alternatives -- we should be able to describe

and then to develop the style of meeting that is appropriate for a given situation. The appropriateness of any new style may be judged by its effectiveness in promoting "genuine meeting" (as described by Martin Buber) between people from different cultural traditions. The aspects of the structure of meetings that we will consider here are (1) participant roles, (2) sequence of participation, (3) topic control, (4) decision-making process, (5) pace, (6) space orientation, (7) punctuality, (8) language choice, and (9) amenities. There are others that could be considered as well, but these should serve our purpose of illustrating how the structure of a meeting can be manipulated.

1. Participant Roles

*Leader/ Audience.....Leader/ Participant.....Facilitator/ Participant.....Participant only*

Consider the participant roles first of all. Should the meeting have a leader and, if so, of what sort? As illustrated here, we can describe the relationship between two categories of participant along a continuum that varies from strong leadership by one individual on the one hand to no leadership at all on the other. The leader/audience option involves a primary speaker who presents his or her point of view to a basically passive audience, in the manner of the lecture format familiar in the West. Limited participation from the audience may be allowed (such as in question/answer periods), but in a way that is very largely controlled by the leader. The leader/participant structure allows more give and take between the leader and the other participants, but the leader still has significantly greater influence; this format is typical of certain "workshop" styles that, again, are familiar in the West. The facilitator/participant option creates a much weaker role for the leader. The facilitator's role is primarily one of coordination and inspiration; his or her influence is only slightly greater than that of the other participants. Finally, the last option involves no leader at all. The group as a whole, in keeping with accepted constraints, governs the entire process.

2. Sequence of Participation

*Ordered.....Monitored.....Open*

Another variable has to do with the sequence of participation by various speakers. The three options are placed along a continuum that registers the degree to which acceptable sequencing is prescribed by convention or authority. An ordered sequence prescribes in some way

who is to speak when. The Maaga system of ordering by rank and authority is one example. Simply moving around a circle giving everyone a chance to speak in turn is another kind of ordered sequence. A monitored sequence involves someone in the role of recognizing speakers according to some predetermined criteria such as equal time for opposing opinions, equal opportunity to speak, and so forth. Open sequencing, on the other hand, places no restrictions on the sequence or duration of participation. This style may cause problems in some intercultural settings because participants representing the prestige culture will tend to dominate the meeting.

3. Topic Control

*Fixed.....Flexible.....Open*

The topic of the discussion may be fixed in advance and therefore largely invariable. Fixed topic control means that each speaker is expected to discuss the main topic and to make little or no reference to indirectly related sub-topics. Another option is to begin with a specified topic, but to handle it with more flexibility; references to indirectly related sub-topics are allowed as long as they seem relevant in some way. Open topic control means that the meeting begins with some very broad general topic category as a springboard for discussion and then progresses spontaneously without any topic-related guidelines.

4. Decision-making Process

*Vote.....Vocal Assessment.....Consensus*

Voting in its various forms is a familiar option for arriving at a decision, one that usually requires one part of the group to resign itself to accepting the other part's point of view. Another option is to have some kind of moderator assess opinion on the basis of the dynamics of vocal participation within the group. Still another option, group consensus, involves an effort by all to sense the common perspective of all by deliberating patiently together until that perspective emerges. The consensus model has been described by James Ogilvy in his discussion of the *desa* system typical in many Indonesian villages.[10] According to Ogilvy, one feels himself to be part of a body whose cohesiveness requires that the whole body grind through the growing pains of resolving or fully incorporating conflicting points of view. One experiences a totally encompassing group dynamic, a dynamic so much a group experience that to call it a "decision-making process" in the familiar sense misses the point. Rather, one feels an emotionally

charged atmosphere in which all of one's sensitivities are tuned to the gradual uncovering of the group's will, not simply that of a particular individual or sub-group. In the absence of an experience of this type, one cannot fully comprehend the *desa* system. Consequently, the consensus option may not be appropriate in those intercultural settings where some of the participants have not shared in such experiences.

5. Pace

*Efficient.....Tolerant.....Patient*

Pace focuses on the degree of efficiency of the meeting in terms of lapsing time. An efficient pace is one that compels a kind of oral participation that moves through a lot of material in a relatively short amount of time. Such a pace is heavily task-oriented, minimizing not only verbal digressions and periods of silence, but also the development and maintenance of relationships among group members. The other extreme of the continuum is patience, which is meant to refer to a willingness, even a desire, to give each speaker the time needed to express himself. In this case, there is almost a lack of awareness of passing time, a lack that is valued. Tolerance falls in between. Pace is difficult to control, but can be manipulated to some degree simply by overtly making a decision to aim for the desired degree of efficiency. Stating that objective at the beginning of the meeting should have some effect on the kind of pace that follows. A decision regarding pace may have no bearing on the time frame of the meeting as a whole, but it will affect the ratio between speaking and silence within that time frame, whatever its length.

6. Space Orientation

*Formal Rows.....Layered Circle.....Loose Circle.....Unstructured*

Space orientation is probably the easiest to manipulate of the variables we are considering here. Formal rows arrange participants so that all are facing in the same direction, but at varying distances from the central focal point. The layered circle is a circle or semicircle in which a distinction is intentionally drawn between those at the heart of the circle and those on its outer periphery. This arrangement characterizes meetings of the Barai of Papua New Guinea, who have four identifiable layers in their circle. The inner core is reserved for key speakers; next are the more interested men; then come the more interested women; finally, there is an outer layer of younger

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

people and marginally interested observers. The third option is the loose circle or semi-circle, in which there is no distinction in terms of layers within the group. The structure is still significant, however, because it maximizes the potential for the participants to face one another. Still another possibility is to avoid any set pattern and so allow the group to assume its own physical shape.

7. Punctuality

*Fixed.....Flexible.....Loose*

Punctuality is one of the more difficult variables to manipulate in intercultural groups because the familiar patterns in traditional and Western circles are often completely at odds with each other. A fixed time orientation, the Western approach, involves the expectation that the meeting will begin "on time" at a predetermined hour and will conclude at a similarly fixed time. A flexible time frame anticipates moderate variation between the set times and the actual times, say from half an hour to one or even two hours late. A loose time orientation, characteristic of many traditional socities, involves the possibility of cheerfully waiting half a day . . . or even a full day for the appointed event to begin. In some societies, waiting for late participants to arrive (even when they are outrageously late by Western standards) is a way of demonstrating respect.

8. Language Choice

*Prestige.....Common.....Multi-lingual*

The choice of language to be used in an intercultural meeting is especially critical to effective dialogue and should be a matter decided by careful choice rather than by acquiescence in the usual practise. Not only does the ability to express oneself vary with the choice of language, but the choice also may communicate something about the relative status of the participating sub-groups. The three options above are meant to describe a continuum in which one pole is the prescribed use of the prestige language by everyone regardless of ability, while the other pole is the free choice by everyone of the language he or she knows best, with interpreters being employed to help as necessary. The intermediate option indicates the choice of a single language solely on the basis of its being a common tongue for the greatest number of people present (again, using interpreters where necessary).

9. Amenities

*Minimal.....Moderate.....Extensive*

The term "amenities" includes a variety of variables rather than a singular one, but these variables are interrelated even though they vary considerably from culture to culture. Grouping them here under one heading brings a basic issue into focus. That issue involves the extent of social activity that accompanies the discussion and decision-making process. In some situations, brief introductions, greetings, and leave-takings may be all that is required. In others, a period of small talk and the exchange of tobacco, betel nut, or some other refreshment may need to precede the discussion, and a snack or meal may be appropriate at the end. In still other situations, such as the one mentioned by Lorenz Aggens in his discussion of the "Samoan Circle",[11] the amenities are so extensive that they outweigh the discussion process . . . and that by design. Several days of feasting and drinking together may be expected before the discussion begins, and the meeting may be closed with yet another drink. The point, of course, is that for many of the world's culture groups it simply is not acceptable to sit down to discuss business without at least a moderate level of social interaction taking place first. Any reconstructed meeting style, then, should consider this aspect as well.

RECONSTRUCTED MEETING STYLES

We turn now to examples of artificially reconstructed meeting styles in order to demonstrate the possibility of capitalizing on the flexibility of the nine aspects and of actually developing new meeting styles that synthesize certain characteristics of meetings in diverse cultural groups. The five examples that follow should provide a feel for what can be done. They are the Samoan Circle, the Park Bench, the Quaker business meeting, the Freirean culture circles, and the Barai "Let's-help-one-another" groups.

The so-called Samoan Circle (which originated in certain Pacific island communities, not necessarily Samoa)[12] uses a meeting style developed by Chicago's regional planning agency because of the difficulty they had experienced in using traditional Western meeting styles when dealing with sensitive issues. The main problem centered around the role of the chairperson. Even though the chairperson usually did everything possible to be equitable and fair, there was considerable fear on the part of the participants that the chairperson was "controlling" the meeting. A staff member of this planning agency explained the problem in these terms:

> *The person responsible for conducting such a meeting [one dealing with controversy] usually feels great personal stress over the need to "control" the meeting and insure that the discussion is equitable and moderate. In attempting to be "in charge" while being fair and neutral, the person presiding over the meeting will often use tactics that will be seen as capricious and arbitrary by those vying for special recognition and influence. If the chairman of the meeting is from the staff or policy board that will be making a decision on the issue under discussion, he or she is likely to become the target for stern admonitions, emotional appeals, and even threats.*[13]

A notable feature of the Samoan Circle is that there is no one who is assigned the role of chairperson, moderator, or facilitator. A Samoan Circle is leaderless, a characteristic achieved by manipulating space orientation and sequence of participation. Seating is arranged in concentric circles with an inner circle of five chairs arranged around a small, round table. All verbal interaction takes place *only* at the table; everyone potentially has access to the five chairs. If all five chairs are not filled and someone not at the table wants to speak, he or she walks to the table, takes an available seat, and enters the discussion. If all five chairs are filled, a person wishing to speak walks to the table and stands nearby until a seat is relinquished. (Those who have used the Samoan Circle find that the relinquishing of seats by speakers is not a problem.) The key element in this meeting style is the close proximity to each other of the speakers. Their closeness around the table tends to heighten their interpersonal orientation and to defuse the kind of verbal abuse that is more easily shouted across a room where there is some distance between the speakers. The Chicago planning board reserved this pattern for meetings aimed at the fullest possible exchange of information and opinions about an issue. Other processes were used for decision-making and for a straightforward presentation of information. The critical aspects of the Samoan Circle, then, are the sequence of participation (open) and the spatial orientation (layered circle); these enable a third aspect, participant roles, to assume an unusual character for large meetings in the West (participant only).

The meeting style known as "The Park Bench"[14] is instructive as a kind of interaction process because the structural elements have been carefully developed to suit a given purpose. The Park Bench is used whenever it is considered important for participants in a meeting to express their feelings to one another about a given topic. (Note that this style may be used as a portion of a meeting conducted primarily in some other manner; users report that they often end meetings with this exercise.) Whoever wishes to express his or her feelings comes up to a small park bench (or similar substitute) and asks the appropriate person or persons to sit there also. The size of the bench compels the two or three people seated there to be in close proximity

to one another, allowing body contact and the opportunity to personally address each other while the remaining participants look on. Those on the bench may express support for one another, make peace, offer constructive criticism, or express other feelings about the topic of the meeting or each other. When one group has finished using the bench, another group may be formed and other feelings expressed. The Park Bench is a group-oriented rather than a task-oriented meeting style, one that stresses personal relationships and social dynamics. In terms of the variables discussed earlier, the sequence of participation is monitored, topic control is open, space orientation is layered circle, and participant roles are limited to participant only.

The Freirean culture circles arose out of an attempt to meet learning needs among preliterate peasants in Brazilian society. Paulo Freire found it necessary to revamp the interaction process typically used in teaching literacy in order to make the experience meaningful to the people with whom he was working. To him, the teacher/student kind of participant roles were counter-productive in that they actually inhibited rather than promoted genuine learning experiences. He felt that the teacher/student approach was based on the false assumption that the teacher is the one who knows and the student is the one who needs to assimilate the teacher's knowledge. Freire's culture circles took as their starting point the fact that real learning is centered around solving practical problems and that everyone concerned about a given problem has some knowledge and experience to contribute to its resolution. "A culture circle is a live and creative dialogue in which everyone knows some things and does not know others, in which all seek together to know more."[15] The Freirean model replaces the teacher or leader in the strong sense with a facilitator whose role is merely to ensure that the entire group participates. The pace allows for pauses and delayed responses. The facilitator tries to stimulate, inspire, and motivate the less active participants. He avoids moving ahead of the group or analyzing for them; he focuses on coordinating the discussion, contributing only as one member of the group. Freirean culture circles promote dialogue and free flowing interaction among all participants. In the terms we have been using, participant roles are facilitator/participant, sequence of participation is monitored or open, pace is tolerant or even patient, and space orientation is loose circle in order to encourage a group orientation.

The Quaker business meeting provides another interesting alternative. In this case there is no chairperson, merely a clerk who introduces the business at hand and records the discussion. The power to guide the course and outcome of the meeting is widely distributed and exercised; participants speak as they are moved to do so. No decision can be reached without the unanimous consent of the participants; this consensus has to be reached by the efforts of all. Even one person out of harmony with the accord of the others can prevent the meeting from arriving at a decision. Periodically, the recorded discussion is read back to the participants by the clerk and then discussion continues until there is an extended period of silence, which

signifies consensus. The meeting is held on the basis of what Quakers call "a living, expectant silence", a hushed atmosphere in which the cooperative brainwork of the entire assembly can occur at a pace that de-emphasizes concern for efficient use of time.[16] In terms of our variables here, participant roles are facilitator/participant, sequence of participation is open, decision-making process is by consensus, and pace is patient (valuing silence in terms of positive mutual effort).

Still another reconstructed meeting style is that being used by a small rural development organization in a remote area of Papua New Guinea. The local name of the group (Barai Ifejianami Sikura) translates as the "Barai Let's-help-one-another Group"; it operates in cooperation with the six local institutions mentioned earlier. The meeting style that has evolved for coordinating the activities of all these groups is significant because of the bridge it has built between the contrasting patterns that are familiar to the various participants. The association's Council is made up of a range of both traditional and Westernized institutional leaders; the latter group includes two expatriates and several educated Papua New Guineans from other areas. In the Council meetings a kind of synthesis of different styles gradually evolved as problems arose and the objectives of the association developed. The following list of variables approximates the pattern currently being used.

| | |
|---|---|
| Participant Roles: | facilitator/participant |
| Sequence of Participation: | monitored |
| Topic Control: | flexible |
| Decision-making Process: | vocal assessment |
| Pace: | tolerant |
| Space Orientation: | loose circle |
| Punctuality: | flexible |
| Language Choice: | common |
| Amenities: | moderate |

The striking feature of this combination of variables is that, in each case, the option currently being used represents an adaptation for both major groups represented on the council, that is, for those residents of the community with an orientation to traditional life as well as for those temporary residents who have come from outside the community and are working in the community through basically Western-style institutions. The importance of variables such as flexible punctuality and moderate amenities must not be underestimated; they represent syntheses of the two basic cultural styles. Vocal assessment as the decision-making process is another area where early struggles showed that both Western voting and traditional consensus inevitably alienated one faction from the other. The selection of participant roles (facilitator/participant) also was critical since

the traditional pattern was leaderless whereas the pattern familiar to the outsiders was leader-oriented.

These are merely suggestive sketches of five reconstructed meeting styles. Nevertheless, they illustrate something of the range of possibilities for building new alternatives appropriate for particular settings. The objective in each case was to promote the kind of mutual flow of insight and information that is so easily distorted in the intercultural situation and yet so important to personal growth and socioeconomic development. Viable development, however defined, is simply impossible without significant participation from all affected parties throughout the planning and decision-making process.

Bernard Narokobi's call to Melanesia to choose its destiny is perceptive and timely. Each man, each sub-culture, each stream in modern civilization has its own perception of the reality we live in, limited in each case by its own biases and yet strengthened by its own insights. In the cross-fertilizing processes that are bringing us all into closer contact with one another, the danger comes when one stream eclipses another. The dominant stream may plunge ahead to failure because of its limited insight; the dominated stream may be subjected to well intentioned programs that are devoid of local values and perspectives. Mutual participation is essential if effective development is to be attained. With no party having any advantage in terms of clarity of vision or depth of understanding, the needed insight must be uncovered together. The difficulty in seeing another interpretation of reality, another perspective on how things are, must not be underestimated. Therefore, those intercultural bodies concerned with planning and decision-making must do everything possible to create meeting styles that maximize comfortable opportunities for all to be heard.

The hope here is that a set of flexible aspects of meeting styles can be identified and used to construct models of group interaction that are appropriate to the specific intercultural situations where they will be used. Flexibility seems particularly vital in the case of development of remote rural areas in the Third World where details relevant to the local situation have not or cannot be documented. Development experts cannot afford to remain ignorant of the perspective of the target community for any reason, including the imposition of inappropriate meeting styles. But since many aspects of meeting styles are flexible and amenable to manipulation, the local perspective can be woven into the development and implementation of all plans and projects.

*Notes are found on the following page.*

1. Narokobi, Bernard. *The Melanesian Way*. Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980. p. 4.

2. Halverson, Claire. Memorandum re: "Observation on Mediation Session at SIETAR, May 25." Milwaukee: June 1, 1984. ms. p. 4.

3. Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.). *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949. p. 162.

4. Castenada, Carlos. *Journey to Ixtlan*. New York: Penguin Books, 1973. pp. 9-11.

5. Buber, Martin. *The Way of Response*. New York: Schocken Books, 1966. p. 47.

6. Ogomeni, Margaret. "Community Based Education in Science and Technology." Port Moresby: Waigani Seminar on Science and Development, 1984. ms. p. 1.

7. Smock, David R., and Smock, Audrey C. *Cultural and Political Aspects of Rural Transformation: A Case Study of Eastern Nigeria*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972. pp. 44-45.

8. Ali, S. Husin. *Malay Peasant Society and Leadership*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. p. 129.

9. Halverson. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

10. Ogilvy, James. *Many Dimensional Man: Decentralizing Self, Society, and the Sacred*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. pp. 125-126.

11. Aggens, Lorenz. "The Samoan Circle: A Small Group Process for Discussing Controversial Subjects." Wilmette, Illinois: n.d. ms. p. 2.

12. The term "Samoan Circle" was coined by people involved in a search for an alternative meeting style for a municipal planning body in Chicago; it was based on someone's recollection of a traditional pattern used somewhere in the Pacific region. "Samoan Circle" entered popular usage in spite of the fact that no clear evidence links it with Samoa.

13. Aggens. *op. cit.*, p. 1.

14. The origins of "The Park Bench" are obscure. It seems to have been passed down over at least a dozen years by a sort of oral tradition within the world of trainers in the United States. Some users associate "The Park Bench" with the National Training Laboratories, but there is no clear evidence to link it with that organization.

15. Freire, Paulo. "The Having and Being of Education." 1980(?) The author and the editor regret their inability to provide a more complete citation for this quotation from Freire. The author originally came upon the quote in a newspaper clipping sent to him by a friend in Australia.

16. Vann, Richard. *The Social Development of English Quakerism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969. p. 120.

    Comfort, William. *The Quaker Way of Life*. Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company, 1945. p. 31.

Announcing the

## A F S ORIENTATION HANDBOOK:

## VOLUME IV

Compiled and edited by the research staff of the well known international exchange organization, this fourth annual volume of the **AFS Orientation Handbook** contains all new material. As in the three previous volumes, **Volume IV** (1984) includes exercises, sample documents, and other resources suitable for training adult and adolescent sojourners as well as those who work with them.

**Volume IV** presents methods and materials for intercultural orientations from AFS and non-AFS sources in several countries: Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United States, and Venezuela. Resources for orientations in the pre-departure, during-the-sojourn, and post-return phases of an intercultural experience are included. For instance, this year's essay on "Thinking about Orientation" describes the three-day post-return orientation program that the AFS office in Venezuela provides for its returning students. And the dramatic production staged by the AFS office in Japan for its returning students is reprinted word for word (in English translation) in Section V.

The featured resource in this volume is "A Workshop on Cultural Differences," perhaps the most powerful orientation exercise ever published in an AFS handbook. Devised by Indrei Ratiu and Irene Rodgers of InterCultural Management Associates (Paris, France), this full-day workshop is based on the unparalleled research studies of Dr. Geert Hofstede of the Institute for Research on Intercultural Cooperation (Arnhem, the Netherlands). Dr. Hofstede's findings, which cover 50 nations, offer a unique quantitative as well as qualitative approach to the understanding of the value differences among peoples.

**Volume IV**'s "Annotated Bibliography" is devoted entirely to fictional and non-fictional stories about contact between people from different cultures during the twentieth century. This bibliography fills a need that has existed in the intercultural field for many years.

Price of **Volume IV**: $7.95. (Price of all four volumes: $26.90.)

**NOTE**: Please do NOT order this handbook from AFS International.

Order directly from **The Intercultural Press**, P.O. Box 768, Yarmouth, Maine 04096. Telephone number 207-846-5168.

Individuals: Prepay with check or money order. Institutions: Send purchase or letterhead order. For one book shipped within the U.S., add $1.00 for shipping; add 25¢ for each additional book. For books shipped to Canada, pay in U.S. dollars and add the same amounts for shipping. For books to other foreign addresses, pay in U.S. dollars and add $1.50 for the first book, 50¢ for each additional book.

## . . . noted in passing . . .

*"The cultural exchange people know that we're unhappy, but they also say that Coco's parents are having some adjustment problems with our Hillary."*

Cartoon by Tim Haggerty. Reprinted by permission.

# OCCASIONAL PAPERS IN INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

is a publication of

AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc.
313 East 43rd Street
New York, NY 10017, USA

Editor: Dr. Neal Grove

Associate Editor: Bettina Hansel

AFS International publishes the **Occasional Papers in Intercultural Learning** as a public service, and for this reason the articles contained in the **Papers** are not copyrighted unless a specific notice to the contrary is provided. Articles printed herein without copyright notice may be quoted or reprinted freely and without permission; however, proper attribution should be given and the Editor of the **Papers** should be informed.

Until further notice, each number of the **Papers** is disseminated without charge. Anyone may have his name added to the mailing list by writing to the Editor.

Potential contributors should communicate with the Editor prior to submitting articles to be considered for publication.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE